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Human Rights Situation of Dalits in Bihar

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Abstract: All human beings have the right to live as human beings. Human rights are not conferred or given. They already exist in society. In spite of these international and national declaration and resolutions, human rights are violated in different countries all over the world. Human right of dalits and women in Bihar in general are normally violated by high castes and powerful communities to practice and exhibit patriarchy and Castism. But human rights of than dalits in general. There is a growing need to capture transgression of human rights of dalits, so that talent and potential of Dalits can be used for development of nation. The concept of human rights aims at protection of rights like right to life, liberty and property. These rights are attributed to human beings irrespective of class, caste, gender, colour and religion. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was unanimously adopted by the UN General Assembly on December 10th 1948. The preamble of Indian constitution adequately empowers the central and state government to eliminate human rights violation in the country. Also In Bihar Dalits are facing the problems of identity crisis, deprivation, discrimination and atrocities. These marginalised groups are also identified and recognised as dalits, SC (scheduled castes), ST (scheduled Tribes), OBC (other backward castes), religious and linguistic minorities. Dalits are in worst position than dalits in general, In terms of sex ratio, wages, employment, occupation, assets, education, health, social mobility and political participation. Hence, it is important to discuss the status of dalits and various problems they face even after 67 years of independence. This article makes an attempt to discuss basic facts, issues and concerns related to dalit to suggest some alternatives to combat violation of their rights for social justice and equality. Explanation of relevant terms such as 'Dalit'; 'Dalitism'; is given below to broaden understanding about the issue. Further, the vulnerable situation of dalits Human right situation in Bihar is also discussed in detail:-

Keywords : Human Rights, Dalit's In Bihar, Dalit Rights

Caste identities are deeply embedded and influence much of Bihar's social economic and political life. Bihar tends to be the most unfortunate repository of the brutalities of the caste system. The modifications and differentiations triggered in the wake of interaction between capitalism and semi-feudalism has failed to alter the basic contours of its oppressive social structure. In Bihar caste seems to maintain its presence as "a dead weight holding back not merely the economic and political but also the cultural and moral development of society and even putting its imprint on the new emerging classes."¹

Dalits have been the worst sufferers in the exploitative social order. No sphere of life is such where equality is accorded to them in interaction with superiors in caste hierarchy. They work on land but can not claim it, perform services essential to the maintenance of society but are ranked lowest in the social hierarchy, produce consumption material but are rendered untouchables. Segregation and exploitation have been their fate. They have been denied elementary facilities available to clean castes and are condemned to live in insularity. They are born in servitude and die in penury. They continue to be peripheral and marginal incapable to claim equality with the privileged. Society remains exploitative, unfair and criminally unjust to them. In rural Bihar, the life of a Dalit " is reduced to total dependency on the

landlord, since in most places semibonded agricultural labour is the only source of livelihood, so also their political life is often reduced to the status of being vote-banks for those who control their lives."² The most deprived and down-trodden among the Dalits of Bihar are the Musahars who are placed at the margin of subsistence surviving on rats, snails, snakes or anything else they can find and live in a kind of social thralldom sometimes selling themselves and their wives and children to lifelong servitude for paltry sums. Dalits are placed unfavourably in the ownership of productive assets as well as the distribution of income. Inequalities tend to be cumulative in their case.

Caste as a system of hierarchical, submission operates as a mechanism of extra-economic coercion of Dalits. It contains prescriptions to ensure unrestrained acquiescence of Dalits to caste Hindus by inculcating in them the dominant traits of humbleness. The traditional etiquette has definite political consciousness as it helps in nurturing instincts of submission among the exploited. In the prevalent social arrangement Dalits have been subjected to various kinds of status disabilities. The values internalised entailed upon Dalits the solemn duty to serve the superior in caste hierarchy. Such prescription could not be challenged.

The 'dola' system was an institutionalised system of sexual exploitation of Dalit women. Such

was the stranglehold of the feudal order in the village that upper caste landlords were supposed to have an undisputed right over Dalits and backward caste women. As such every newly married Dalit women had to pass her first night after marriage with the village landlord. Thus those who escaped being raped by the landlords had to undergo the trauma after getting married. These were extra-economic methods devised by the landlords to continuously remind this lower in the caste hierarchy of their 'aukat'.³

Dalits not only lack the means to celebrate, but they are also entitled to observe various Hindu festivals lest they antagonise the dignity of upper castes. Festival have always meant humiliation to them and their female members. Thus in the celebration of Hindu festival Holi, famous for its vulgarity, it is the Dalit women who always have to bear the brunt of the upper caste people. In the manner it used to be observed in Bihar, Holi represents very directly the subjugation of the lower caste women in particular. Sexually explicit songs, molestation and even rape of the Dalit women have been a common feature. On refusal to satisfy the sexual lust of the upper castes, the Dalit bastis have been burned to ashes in many cases. Thus refusal to comply with the established tradition invites severest of the punishment to Dalits in various parts of Bihar.

The 1985 report of the L.N.Mishra Institute of Economic and Growth regarding the work of the Bihar Corporation for the Development of the Scheduled Castes observed that more than 95% of Dalits in Bihar live below poverty line. The majority of them remain untouchable as before and suffer from traditional restrictions- they have no access to common drinking water sources, tea-shops and eating houses, cannot -- walk on the main village streets and so on. In the districts which are surveyed Dalits had no knowledge of the existence of the Protection of Civil Rights Act (1955) and in all the villages of these districts Dalits live in segregated areas beyond the village bounds.⁴

In a similar survey regarding social disabilities of Dalits conducted in the districts of Nawada, Rohtas and Madhubani, it was found that different areas recorded different forms of social disability of Dalits depending on attitude and behaviour of caste Hindus towards Dalits and

dominance of upper caste people. In the Nawada district the social disabilities faced by the Dalits were found to be of limited nature in public places but at the same time caste Hindus of the area particularly Rajputs and Bhumihars still maintained their casteist attitude towards Dalits. In the Rohtas district social disability and untouchability existed to a much greater extent. Dalit childrens were not allowed to join the schools, and if admitted were not allowed to sit together with the children of caste Hindus. In Madhubani Dalits were not allowed to utilise the bathing ghats, tea stalls, public temples used by the caste Hindus. The

social disabilities faced by Dalits was regarded customary by caste Hindus particularly Brahmins and Dalits were forced to lead a subhuman life. In a nut shell social disability and untouchability by and large existed both in over and covert forms in various parts of Bihar.⁵

The idioms in which the landlords addressed the untouchable have been one of ridicule, abuse and contempt. Upper Castes as well as Yadav and Kurmi land-lords persisted in treating Dalits as inferiors, abusing them in terms such as 'rape mother' and 'rape sister' and sexually assaulting Dalit women. They also generally refused demands for wages in accordance with government rates and stopped some of the traditional side payments, even evicted some of Dalits from homestead lands.⁶

Education is an important means of reducing Ignorance and inequality in society. It helps the individual to raise his social status in various ways. Knowledge, skills, values and attitudes acquired through education helps one to lead a desired quality of life.

In census enumeration a person is counted as literate if he or she can read and write in any language with understanding. In earlier censuses the whole population was classified as literates and illiterates. Whereas from 1951 the questions on literacy have been categorised among those aged 5 and above. However, in the 1991 census this classification was confined to the age group of 7 years and above. The literacy rate of social groups in Bihar is presented in Table 3.1. This table presents the literacy rate of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and all groups for 1961, 1971, 1981, and 1991.

Table - 3.1 . Literacy Rate of Social Groups in Bihar

Literacy Rate					Male				Female			
Year	1961	1971	1981	1991	1961	1971	1981	1991	1961	1971	1981	1991
SC	6.0	6.5	10.4	15.1	11.2	11.9	18.0	24.0	0.9	1.0	2.5	5.4
ST	9.2	11.6	17.0	21.4	15.2	18.5	26.2	30.8	3.2	4.9	7.8	11.8
All	18.4	9.9	26.2	30.6	29.8	30.6	38.1	42.0	6.9	8.7	13.6	18.1
Rural												
SC	5.4	5.8	9.1	13.5	10.3	10.9	16.3	20.1	0.8	0.7	1.8	4.3
ST	8.6	10.7	15.6	19.8	14.6	17.4	24.6	29.1	2.8	4.1	6.5	10.2
All	15.3	17.2	22.2	26.7	24.7	27.6	34.4	38.3	4.1	6.4	10.2	14.1

Literacy Rate					Male				Female			
Year	1961	1971	1981	1991	1961	1971	1981	1991	1961	1971	1981	1991
Urban												
SC	15.1	16.6	24.3	31.1	25.0	26.1	35.9	42.5	4.1	5.5	10.8	17.8
ST	28.8	32.3	38.5	43.1	38.1	40.5	48.3	51.8	18.2	22.8	27.8	33.6
All	40.1	44.9	52.2	56.0	51.4	55.4	62.5	64.9	25.6	31.9	39.8	45.5

Source: Census of India, Series - 1 , Final population totals : Brief analysis of Primary Census Abstract 1961-1991. Primary Census Abstract for SCs 1961-1991. Primary Census Abstract for STs 1961-1991.

The general condition of education among Scheduled castes is pitiable. It is a matter of common knowledge that the Scheduled Castes have lagged behind in the field of education not only in Bihar but all over the country. In 1961 the literacy rate among Scheduled Castes in Bihar was only 6 %. It increased to 6.5 % in 1971 and 10.40 % in 1981. Whereas in 1991 the literacy rate among Scheduled castes in Bihar was only 15 % which happens to be the lowest in India. The rural and urban areas level of literacy rate among Scheduled Castes have been very low as compared to other social groups. The female literacy rate among Scheduled Castes have been pathetically low in Bihar.

One of the institutions for economic exploitation of Dalits has been the 'Kamia System' reported to be operative in a number of districts in Bihar . The system seems to have been based on the mechanism of credit and indebtedness. In order to ensure control over labour in time of distress in the post harvest period in the exceptional times, the rich peasantry would advance small loans to the poor cultivators whereby they secure control over cultivators labour till repayment of debt was complete. In the absence of possession of land, animals and the elementary agricultural inputs, such hapless peasantry could be the most convenient target of the landed castes. Once in debt the poor could not escape from being fleeced by the landlord under the system of bondage. The conditions of debt- repayment were so fixed that even the best efforts by the debtor could not ensure his release from the clutches of the landlord. Thus to prevent repayment of debt given to the Kamia, the landowner had a condition that unless it was repaid on a certain day usually sometime in the 'Jyeth' when the funds are low, it was optional for the master to refuse acceptance.⁷

In some of the areas, in addition to debt slavery a system of bondage nurtured by the caste system the landowning upper castes and the labours belonging to the scheduled castes bind themselves in a life long stable alliance. The bondage is hereditary as it relates to relationship between patrilineal descent groups of masters and servants. As an institution of fairly long standing it is a channel to transmit rights and obligations from one generation to another. Under the system the landless labourer turns out to be a transferable commodity sold and mortgaged to settle problem situations.⁸

Despite the distribution of land under ceiling and government land the percentage of scheduled castes landless households has increase from 7.92 percent in 1982 to 19.73 percent in 1992, nearly 80.27 percent of scheduled caste household own some land in 1992. However, of these nearly 77.08 percent were holding owing less than 2.49 acres in 1992. The average area owned by this small farmer is 0.89 acre which is near landless household. The landless and near landless but together account nearly 96.8 percent of the total scheduled caste household. It's indicate pitiable condition of scheduled castes **in Bihar**.

The report of the Commissioner for Scheduled caste and Scheduled Tribe for 1979-81 shows that Bihar was not among the twelve states with the highest number of atrocities against Dalits between 1967 and 1974. Suddenly in that year Bihar made its first appearance as the sixth worst case; in 1974 it was ranked fourth, and then third for the four years from 1976 to 1979. In subsequent years Bihar has remained near the top of the table. As a matter of fact since the middle of the 1970s till the present day sharp clashes have been going on between the landowners and Dalit agricultural labourers. Landlords have set up their own militant gangs to fight against those who refuse to submit to their domination in the villages. They have let loose a reign of terror in large areas in Bihar. They have carried out especially cruel reprisals against poor and helpless Dalits. From 1977 onwards the incidence of crimes against Dalits have been steadily rising. 681 cases were reported in 1977; 1911 in 1978; 2457 in 1979; 1890 in 1980; and from 1981 to 1986; 10873 cases of crimes against Dalits have been reported from Bihar.⁹ Thus from 1977 to 1986 in all 17812 cases of crimes against Dalits were reported. Whereas from 1992 to 1997 prior to Laxmanpur Bathe carnage in which 61 Dalits are reported to have been murdered in cold blood, around 8736 cases have been reported.¹⁰

The state of Emergency was a major factor in the emergence of the violent politics of contemporary Bihar. This period did Operation Thunder, but also a left authoritarianism in the form of efforts to bring about land reform exemplify notable not nearly for right wing authoritarianism? There were other anti-poverty and social reform measures that were part of the '20 point programme' of the Emergency, including the ending of bonded labour- a matter which mostly affected untouchables and

tribals.) Prior to the Emergency in Bihar not a single

acre of land had been resumed and redistributed to the landless under the existing land ceiling legislation. Under strict instructions from New Delhi, some 225,000 acres were redistributed during the Emergency. Of course, this figure was pitiful relative to the overall need for redistribution to the tiller. Even worse, in the ensuing years most of this land was clawed back by the owners through court action. Nonetheless, for the first time land was changing hands at the behest of the state, and it was mainly Untouchables who were the beneficiaries. Such action contributed to a long term heightening of consciousness among untouchables that their lot in life was not merely to accept their own landlessness.¹¹

The period of Karpoori Thakur's Chief Ministership from 1977 to 1980 marked the beginning of a major upsurge in the number of Dalit atrocities reported from Bihar. There remains doubt as to the extent to which Thakur's own actions precipitated the upsurge. This part of the explanation for the increased violence at this time was that the legacy of the Emergency was being contested in relation to land that had been at least notionally reassigned by the state to untouchables and other landless people. Sometimes the land so assigned was 'wasteland' used as a common grazing resource for the village as a whole. On other occasions the land had been resumed from the individual landlords as being surplus to the enacted ceiling on landownership. In both situations, typically the new assignment of land was bitterly resented and was the direct cause of many violent clashes between dominant landholding communities and untouchables.¹²

Thus one of the chief peculiarities of the violent situation in Bihar has been the intensification of the struggle for land, for the right to cultivate the plot received from the government in accordance with the agrarian reforms and to gather harvest from it, and also for raising the wages of agricultural workers, many among whom are Dalits. This struggle in seen most acutely in the clashes between the Dalit agricultural workers and the dominant caste landowners.

The worst of the caste carnage over the past two decades or so has been concentrated in the following ten districts of Bihar: Patna, Nalanda, Jehanabad, Gaya, Nawadah, Aurangabad, Bhojpur, Buxar, Bhabhua and Rohtas. The population of Dalits in these ten districts of Magadh and Patna division is around 20 % of the total population of these two divisions. The majority of the Dalits are landless labourers. They not only are socially ostracised, deemed to be the most inferior in matters of social standing. Over the years the conditions of severe economic vulnerability and decreasing legitimacy of domination, the spread of new political values and organisations have finally

taken root. The challenges from Dalits have increased and are being met with sharp hostility. The private caste armies are products of that hostility. Challenges from Dalits are seen by the land owning castes as threat to both their economic dominance and social status. There has been a characteristic response from the land owning castes: "How dare they challenge our authority"? Much of the conflict is about teaching the Dalits and their organisers a lesson in subservience, about keeping them in their place.¹³

Nine major caste carnage starting from Belchi in 1977 to Laxmanpur Bathe in 1997 are mentioned here as the examples of jungle raj and killing fields prevalent in Bihar which have put a question mark not only on the civil society but also on the governability of the state.

1. Belchi

Belchi is an inaccessible village of Patna district. It has no proper approach road to make the village accessible round the year. With inadequate communication facilities and lack of interest on the part of authorities concerned with the development of the area, the village has remained backward. This otherwise "sleepy" and obscure village attracted the attention of all sections of the country when on May 27, 1977, eight Dalits and three member of the backward castes were shot down and thrown into a common funeral pyre. The culprits were suspected to belong to a gang under the name of "Banduk dhari party"¹⁴ of Kurmi landlords who killed those posing a threat to their stranglehold over the power structure of the village.

The Union Home Ministry said in a Press note that gang warfare between two rival groups of criminals was responsible for the May 27 incident in Belchi village near Patna in which 11 persons were killed. Quoting reports received from the State Government, the Home Ministry said that the incident had no caste, communal, agrarian or political orientation and "it had nothing to do with atrocities on weaker sections of society"¹⁵ This was however disputed by many,

The 9-member Parliamentary committee headed by Mr. Ramdhan which conducted an enquiry came to the conclusion that the Bihar government's report "that there was a clash between two groups of hardened criminals having long standing rivalry is totally false." According to the committee, it was instead a case of premeditated, well planned mass murder of landless Scheduled castes by a large gang of Kurmis, the prosperous farmers of the area who had secured firearms through the influence of local political leader. There was no encounter. The murderers caught hold of their eleven victims, tied them up with ropes, poured kerosene on them and threw them into a mass pyre.¹⁶

The commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes thus observed :

"There are reasons to believe that it was a case of atrocities committed on Scheduled Castes. Though no apparent political motives could be ascribed to this incident, there was definite economic and social motives. Well-to-do sections among the Kurmis wanted to maintain their unchallenged economic and social supremacy and tried to be ruthless in dealing with persons of Scheduled Castes, Community who posed any threat to their over lordship. Killing of 11 persons in broad-day light could be accomplished only by hardened criminals and just because some of them were involved in criminal activities against their own caste men should not be taken as indication that they did not carry out atrocities on Scheduled castes and indulged in criminal warfare only".¹⁷

The brutal murder of Singhwa and others left the poor downtrodden of Belchi defenceless against the rampaging caste ridden landlords of the area. Singhwa was the light, which the gangsters have put out throwing the Belchi into utter darkness at the moment.¹⁸

2. Paras bigha

Parasbigha, the village which became the scene of gruesome caste violence early in February 1980 is situated to the right of the Jahanabad-Gaya road, some 5 kms from the district headquarter of Jahanabad. From the road to the village, a distance of 2 kms has to be covered through paddy fields before one is able to reach the village. During rainy season, the undulating foot-paths in between the fields become slippery, extremely narrow and untraversable.

It was this village that was invaded by a pack of upper caste Bhumihars in the night of February 6, 1980. Houses were set on fire and when the inmates tried to escape, they were shot and thrown into the leaping flame. Twelve lives were lost-7 women, 2 children and 3 men. Of them 6 alone belonged to the family of Sukhdeo Bhagat, a sephard by caste. The Bhumihars were avenging the murder of Niranjana Sharma, one of their caste who was assassinated in October 1979 in the village. They suspected that the sephards, and particularly Sukhdeo Bhagat had a hand in the murder, who also happened to be the leader of the dissenting lower caste groups in the village.¹⁹

3. Pipra

It was ten in the night of February 25, 1980, when the untouchable locality of the Abdalpur-Pipra village was invaded by the neighbouring village Kalyanchak of Patna district. The invaders numbering about 200 were armed to the teeth, mostly with fire-arms. They set on fire the twenty-seven houses of the untouchables made mostly of mud and straw, shot indiscriminately, looted their belongings and burnt alive their cattle.

For full six hours the shooting spree went on with unabated fury. Fourteen untouchables lay

dead. Such was the scale of brutality that the marauders caught hold of a two-year-old boy and tossed him into the all devouring leaping flame.

The Kurmis were avenging the murder of one Bhola Singh, a large landowner from Kalyanchak. It was alleged that the Bhola Singh was done to death by the Naxals who were supposed to be organising the untouchables of the area against the tyrannies of the land owners. The Kurmis suspected that the untouchables of Pipra were in complicity with Naxals.²⁰

4. Arwal.

April 19, 1986 is a black day in the history of post-independence Bihar. The incidents that occurred in Arwal in the district of Jahanabad are a manifestation of sheer barbarism and raw power. These revealed the shocking magnitude to which repressive apparatus of the State may go. On this day 21 people belonging to the Mazdoor Kissan Sangram Samiti (MKSS) were killed in Police firing. The incident arose out of a dispute between nine families (eight scheduled castes and one backward caste) and an Executive Engineer (belonging to one of the Scheduled Castes) over a tiny marshy and uncultivable piece of land. The land was in dispute for over nine years and in spite of the court verdict against the Engineer, he managed to take possession of the land due to his excellent rapport with the Police and the State administration. In the month of January 1986, he demolished the huts of nine families and erected a concrete wall around the plot with the help of police. In protest against this a strong mob of MKSS demolished the wall.

On the fateful day, the hundreds of members of MKSS participated in the operation wall removal. The Police felt humiliated, some members of the MKSS were also arrested. This, however, did not appear much in the eyes of the Police. The humiliated police officer instead of diffusing the tension made it a matter of prestige. In order to teach these people a lesson and also in order to assure the feudal elements of the area about the unstinted support of the administration-the superintendent of Police called for more assistance. The place where the participants of the protest movement were holding an entirely peaceful meeting was combed by the police in a manner so as to prevent peaceful dispersal of the gathering. And it turned out to be another 'Jallianwala Bagh massacre'.²¹

The claim of the police to have fired in self-defence was dubbed by the people's Tribunal as one unworthy of credence and criticised this act of cruelty in the following words.

The firing in question was highly indiscriminate, unnecessary and unjustified. This firing amounted to brutal murder of 21 citizens of this country.²²

A fact finding team of people's Union for Democratic Right (PU DR) observed that massacre at Arwal was a barbarous and unprovoked firing at a peaceful meeting which will rank as one of the worst of police excesses in post-independence India. But the massacre at Arwal was not the result of land dispute over 1 j 4 of an acre, neither was it due to Baidyanath Rajak's clout, conspiracies by congress (I) leaders, or C.R Kaswan's described by local people as the General Dyer of Arwal –trigger happy nature or even the corruption and brutalisation which characterises Bihar's administration. All these had a part to play, but were in the final analysis incidental. To understand why Arwal happened we have to understand why people here are organising themselves on questions of economic justice and human dignity and the response to this by the local elites and the state. It is the response of the state to Arwal which marks, in a sense, a turning point. The subdivision of Jehanabad was declared a police district on first of April 1986, shortly after the Chief Minister in Paliganj is reported to have given local land owners a promise that the Naxalites would be dealt with. C.R Kaswan was appointed S.P. on the 16th April 1986 and the massacre at Arwal occurred on the 19th April 1986, only three days later. This conjunction of dates was too close to be a mere coincidence and it lent weight to the suspicion that Arwal was a pre-planned mass murder.²³

5. Kansara

On July 8, 1986, about 150 persons of Bhumihar caste armed with rifles, guns and pistols and other lethal weapons attacked the Kahar tola of kansara and in a brutal way killed ten landless labourers. The attack was to avenge the murder of one Vijay Singh, the news of whose death

led to this violent attack on the Kahars. Vijay Singh, a Bhumihar by caste was a terror in its area who not only gave shelters to known criminals but also use to harass Dalits in many ways and was also alleged to have raped Dalit women. It is said that latest tension was sparked off by a dispute over possession of fishes in a pond. The labourers are said to have foiled the attempts of the Bhumihar landlords to keep them away in state of perpetual deprivation.²⁴

6. Bathani Tola

The barbaric massacre of 19 people took place in Bathani Tola hamlet of Badki Khadaon village, of the Sahar block of Bhojpur district. All the victims were gunned down by the well-armed marauders, nearly 150-200 in number, belonging to the Ranveer Sena. The Ranvir Sena's killers converged on the village at about 1PM in broad day light, firing indiscriminately; the inhabitants of the village tried to resist with traditional weapons but had to retreat in face of a shower of bullets from every corner. They fled into open fields; their huts were set on fire. The marauders continued with this

mayhem for nearly an hour. While a special police camp was only one km away from Bathani Tola and the police arrived at the spot only by late evening. The victims belonged to Dalit, OBC and Muslim communities, and mostly poor and marginal peasants.²⁵

7. Haibaspur

On March 23, 1997, ten landless of Mushahar caste were killed in Haibaspur village in Patna district, apparently for aligning themselves with the CPI (M.L) Party Unity. Before leaving the village, the Ranvir Sena inscribed its organisation's name in blood on the rim of a dry well. ²⁶ It is alleged that alcohol and the rape of Dalit women by Bhumihars played a key role in the attack on the village. Although the police were informed immediately of the Haibaspur killings, they did not arrive on the scene until the following morning, after hearing that the Chief Minister was due to visit the site.²⁷

8. Ekwari

On the morning of April 10, 1997, members of the Ranvir Sena gunned down eight residents of Ekwari village in Bhojpur district in an operation that lasted two hours. Police officers stationed nearby forced open the villager's houses and then stood by and watched as the massacre took place. Seven of the eight killed belonged to the lower castes Lohars, Chamars, Dhobis and Kahars. The attackers raped a fifteen year old girl in presence of her father and a woman who was eight months pregnant was also raped. Both these were among the victims.²⁸

9. Laxmanpur-Bathe

In the worst-ever carnage witnessed in the State, atleast 61 dalits were killed and four injured when hundreds of armed Ranvir Sena activists orchestrated an orgy of violence at Luxmanpur Bathe in the night of December 1, 1997. The deceased included 16 children 27 women and 18 mens. The age of the deceased persons varies from two years to 66 years.²⁹

The village of Laxmanpur-Bathe has no electricity and is virtually inaccessible by road. In crossing the Sone River to reach the village, Sena members reportedly also killed five members of the Mallah (fisherman) community and murdered the three Mallah boatmen who had ferried them across the river on their way back.³⁰ According to newspaper reports, the main reason for the attack was that the Bhumihars wanted to seize fifty acres of land that had been earmarked for distribution among the landless labourers of the village. A group of peasants, reportedly affiliated with Naxalite activity, was ready to take up arms against them.³¹ Authorities apparently knew of the tensions but had not cared to intervene in the land dispute and nip the trouble in the bud and instead allowed things to come to a head.³²

The massacre evoked widespread condemnation. The President, Mr.K.R.Narayanan, condemned the massacre in Jahanabad expressing anguish and disbelief on the incident where several poor and deprived families were killed. Extending his heart felt condolences to the next of kin of those killed he said, "I share their agony and of all thinking, sensitive people. At the sametime I would like to express my sense of nrevulsion at the unchecked growth of caste wars and economic war in parts of rural India especially against the poorer sections." He said it was a "national shame" that private armies should be employed by powerful interests to perpetrate such outrage. "Those found guilty of this carnage must be brought to account speedily and decisively", he said.³³

Following widespread publicity and condemnation about the massacre, Bihar Chief Minister Rabri Devi suspended the Jahanabad Superintendent of Police and also replaced several senior officers. The Chief Minister also announced about the cabinet's decision to constitute Special Investigation Team(SIT) and a special court to *try*

the marauders responsible for Laxmanpur Bathe killings.³⁴

Thus it can very well be said that positions of dominance and privilege in the rural hierarchy depends upon the control of land and other natural resources. The caste system supports and strengthen· feudal authority in central Bihar, serving as the social and ideological basis for the denial of access to land and a life of dignity to the lower castes. It is also the basis for social enforcement of exploitation and oppression.

The fundamental contradiction between dominant castes, both traditional and post-land reform on the one land, and labouring castes on the other informs *every* aspect of social life and cannot be understood simply in caste terms in the narrow sense. The dominant castes are overwhelming in control of material, political and ideological power: they are both a dominant caste and dominant class. Therefore, status, honour or dignity are linked with politico-economic position. Caste power is also economic and political power.³⁵

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